Review: [Untitled]

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Zelig by Woody Allen; Robert Greenhut
Peter Hogue; Marion Bronson

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guilt-inducing taboos ("Nice girls don't"), the terror of secret desire unleashed, the suspicion that men don't really want sexually active (i.e., demanding) women, as well as the dream of extraordinary power mined from sexual energy. The intensity of female sexual expression presented by Gordon is a far cry from the gentle, nurturing, sensitive brand endorsed by many feminists. She delineates a variety of female lust that equals the male's in its capacity for consuming and objectifying the Other; and she proposes that, like men, women project erotic fantasies upon those they desire.

Variety was accepted for screening at the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes, but the film hasn't yet had a commercial New York opening, exhibitors and distributors there being quite unreceptive. Writing in the *Village Voice,* Amy Taubin observed that the film is being received with consternation and Gordon accused of "embracing images that are degrading to women." With the "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem" mentality dichotomizing the women's movement over these issues, that's not surprising. Joining the company of Ruby Rich, Ellen Willis and others who have criticized the feminist antipornography campaign, Gordon adds a strong questioning voice. Courageously inconclusive, she urges us to look deeper, to savor complexity, and to consider sexuality in all its profound variety. —LINDA DUBLER

ZELIG

Written and directed by Woody Allen. Producer: Robert Greenhut. Photography: Gordon Willis. Music: Dick Hyman. Orion/Warners.

Zelig, Woody Allen's fictional compilation documentary about a chameleon-like man who changes shape and color so that he can blend into his social surroundings, looks at first like a clever stunt. But it is also something of a departure for Allen and, on reflection, may be his richest and most original work so far.

The film's most readily noticeable virtues have to do with the ways in which Allen and cinematographer Gordon Willis have blended their own footage in with archival material—sometimes finding ways to insert Allen's image into vintage photographs and newsreels. In some respects, it's simply a visual *tour de force* in which an Allen film persona becomes a part of the fads and scandals of the twenties via lovingly recreated amateur and newsreel images done in the manner of their period. But *Zelig,* in its roundabout and quasi-parodistic way, is also a love story, a fable on confirmity, and a surprisingly complex meditation on media images. Allen's preoccupations with psychiatry, sexual relations, intellectuality, and Jewishness all get further play here, but the unexpected consequences of *Zelig*'s form put such matters in a more complex and rewarding light than has been the case with previous Allen films. Along the way, *Zelig* stretches the boundaries of Allen's comedy and marks the most sophisticated development in his career as an increasingly self-reflexive film-maker.

It is tempting to view the film as merely a set of variations, however erudite, on Allen's established comic persona and on his terrain as film *auteur.* But while the title character takes his place among the neurotically self-deprecating comic-romantic protagonists of Allen's films, Zelig is perhaps the most distanced figure in that group. The "typical" Woody Allen bits are divided among several characters, and neither Allen's role nor any other is permitted to dominate the foreground. Whereas even the "darker" Allen films like *Manhattan* and *Stardust Memories* put some variation of "Woody Allen" in the foreground, *Zelig* centers on something more conceptual. At first, that concept and its reverberations seem primarily comic and satiric, but as the film's preoccupation with images and social psychology grows increasingly complex, it also becomes clearer that *Zelig* has some special dimensions. The title character is less a "star" than a figure in a meditation with the meditation itself taking the foreground.

The film's concerns with conformism and with love are obvious enough, and the casual air of the comic elements may at first limit our responses to those concerns. But the film has a kind of delayed-reaction effect. The title character's chameleon syndrome is clearly grounded in an overwhelming need to conform, to blend in, to be like others and to be

liked by them. But what at first seems an almost cursory satire on the conformist impulse becomes increasingly perceptive as it becomes increasingly complex. For Zelig's extravagant desire to appear "normal" is itself "normal": his chameleon transformations are aberrant, and yet they are also simply dramatic extensions of typical behavior in a mass society. In one of the film's modest but stunning twists, the conformist impulse leads Zelig to become a Nazi in Hitler's Germany: as such he is not only "the ultimate conformist" but also a bitterly ironic comment on the Jew who, in the words of one of the film's *Reds*-like "witnesses," "wanted to assimilate like crazy." Zelig emerges from all that as a hero when he and Eudora Fletcher (his lover-psychiatrist played by Mia Farrow) flee the Nazis by flying across the Atlantic upside down. Zelig blithely tells the newsreel cameras that his exploits show "what you can do if you're a total psychotic"; the character seems to intend no irony, but his words reverberate with surprising force in the film's gradually developing sense of a situation in which heroes, conformists, and the public with its "crazes" and whims are both "mad" and "normal."

A certain rich ambivalence also prevails in the film's reflections on the decade or so of mostly American history which is an essential part of Zelig's story. A substantial piece of *Zelig* is a kind of love letter to the sensationalism, fads, and scandals of the "Roaring Twenties," with part of the affection being expressed through those loving recreations of newsreels and "amateur" films from the days before people in general had adapted to the camera's gaze in the way that they have now. And the love story is in part from the movies' age of innocence, with the fictional documentary form serving as a modernist means of reviving such feelings. But Zelig is also the bewildered and dehumanized victim of a society in which he is alternately glamorized and vilified, glorified and institutionalized, celebrated and commercialized, liberated and "fine-tuned," commemorated and forgotten. And the Nazi episode and the sense of psychosis beneath the crazes of the period's popular culture ultimately cast the historical setting in a light that mixes much bitterness amid the fondness. After Zelig's brief alliance

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with Hitler, it is difficult not to see the Roaring Twenties of the film as an oblique, deluded prelude to the era of genocidal dictatorships: glimpses of the conformism, the fickleness, and the hypocrisy in pop culture become more ominous in this light, and various passing remarks by the film's witnesses leave us with the disturbing perception that "things haven't changed all that much."

The importance of love is evident enough in what develops between Zelig and his psychiatrist. But, here too, enriching complications overtake what at first seems to be merely an oddly comical romance. Love is a "cure" not only for Zelig, but also for his doctor: she "treats" him not just with psychiatric acumen but with "unconditional positive regard" as well, and this decidedly personal approach also serves as an antidote to her dissatisfaction with a life that has been almost exclusively focused on professional success. In one of the film's newsreels, the couple is paid tribute as "an inspiration to the young of this nation who will one day grow up and be great doctors and great patients." Whatever the speaker's intentions, his words serve the film's view of love in a metaphorical (and deceptively slippery) way. For with this cou-

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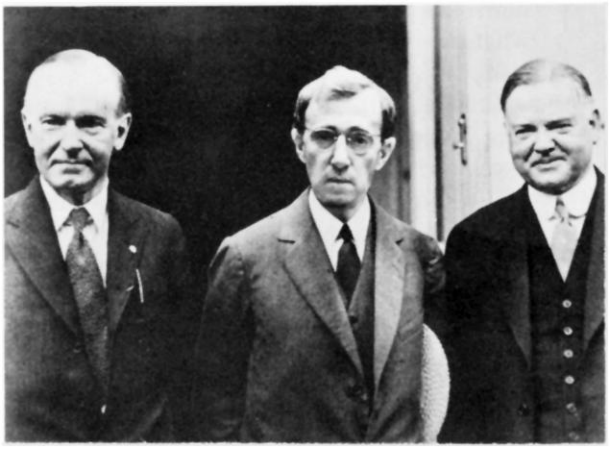

ple, love transcends neurosis only when the partners are able to perform as both doctor and patient on each other's behalf: in a psychiatrically self-conscious relationship, psychiatric self-consciousness is itself one of the things that the partners have to find a "cure" for. But the "cure" remains in (somewhat comical) doubt: the doctor-patient arrangement makes sense more as metaphor than as method; and a key aspect of Zelig's psychological condition, the frustrated desire to read *Moby-Dick,* is still haunting him at the end of his life. Moreover, the film's sunlit "happy ending" leaves us to conclude for ourselves as to whether or not the contented doctor-patient couple is an emblem of a conformism which aligns itself with the myths of romantic love.

But even these major subcurrents are altered, or convoluted, by Allen's knowing play with the film's images and its form. Visually, the film might have been inspired by the newsreel segment of *Citizen Kane,* and the film's piecing together of a man's life has intriguing parallels with the Welles film. *Zelig*'s title character is not as emphatically "mysterious" as Charles Foster Kane is, but both men's stories are subject to similar ambiguities and uncertainties. Both exist for us only through the accounts of others, and both portraits are cast in forms which set traps for the oversimplified response. Rosebud notwithstanding, Kane's personality is something of an unfinished jigsaw puzzle which defies summation; true love notwithstanding, Zelig is a creature of media images in a "document" which is seemingly exhaustive at the same time that it is vaguely but persistently unreliable. The view we have of Zelig is limited in most respects to what can be retrieved from photographs and movie footage. The part of his life that took place after he stopped appearing in newsreels is touched on only in passing. Thus, what the images convey also provokes skepticism.

In one of the more dramatic examples of this, a newsreel celebrating Eudora Fletcher's psychiatric success with Zelig's case concludes with a shot of her doing some sewing while the voice-over commentator observes that she has proven that women can do something besides sew. This bit of concocted newsreel, of course, slyly evokes the limited perspectives and casual contradictions in an era's assumptions. The remark is a bit of self-cancelling lipservice paid by the newsreel to the feminism of the twenties, but the benighted quaintness of the remark is only part of the effect that Allen gets here. There is also a certain disparity between the image and the remark—first in that the image seems to regress from the point that the voice-over commentator is trying to make and second in that the image is being used on behalf of a logic which is almost certainly separate from the logic behind the original shot (one can imagine Fletcher agreeing to demonstrate "another" of her talents for the camera, but it seems unlikely that she would have posed for the purpose which is imposed by the voice-over). Such moments reflect the extraordinary ingenuity that has gone into this "false documentary" and into images like these which are at once so innocent and so complex. But they also remind us of the manipulability and unreliability of photographic images, thereby provoking a critical awareness which must pervade our ultimate responses to the film.

Allen's satirical intentions are more plainly in the foreground in a newsreel interview with Fletcher's mother, but the satire also offers one of the clearest examples of constricting media codes in *Zelig*. The interviewer plunges blindly ahead on a line of questioning that presumes the standard set of sentiments (determination and pride, etc.) in the parents of someone successful. But Fletcher's mother, a sort of thoughtful sourpuss, answers forthrightly enough to evoke a trail of doubts, misgivings, and sadnesses that further highlights the anodyne, blandly conventional answers which are implicit (and sometimes explicit) in the questions themselves. The interviewer's smarmy evasions of the realities alluded to by Mrs. Fletcher are yet another element of the newsreels which cast a kind of retroactive doubt on all of the material from which compilation-style film portraits are built. No less ironic is the sense of mutual obliviousness between the interviewer and interviewee. This and the stock questions which seem to "cue" stock answers call further attention to the tendency toward pigeonholing that was also evident in the shot of the psychiatrist at her sewing. In such instances, the film-maker seems to beckon to the audi-

ence with variants of Woody-humor while also making the irony strong enough that we maintain a critical detachment.

But *Zelig* is not quite as detached as this may suggest. If unusually distanced for an Allen comedy, it is also a film which is capable of undercutting its own air of detachment. This is perhaps especially evident in the doubly ironic contrasts that emerge from the inclusion of scenes from a supposed Warner Brothers film biography on Zelig. The documentary witnesses assert that "the movie" falsifies the Zelig story, and indeed the emotionalized "classical" *mise en scène* of this film-within-a-film is a hokey variation on the story that we are getting in the putatively more objective terms of documentary. But the documentary version of Zelig's life also has much in common with its "Hollywood" counterpart. The recreated Nazi newsreel footage frequently looks as false as the Hollywood version, and the latter's melodramatic emphasis on Eudora's determination to find a *personal* solution to Zelig's emotional problems is closer to the substance of the "factual" version than may at first be evident. And given Hollywood's penchant for playing up personal solutions rather than those which call for larger perspectives, it is intriguing to contemplate the possibility of a double-edged irony here, with the documentary version being every bit as complicit in stock answers as the patently "fake" one is.

Like its view of the twenties, this movie is both bitter and fond. For all its critical distancing, it is also a film which frequently dwells on and takes pleasure in the surface of things. Its loving pastiches (by Dick Hyman) of the period's music are one major sign of that lyrical impulse, but so is its attention to visual detail in the fabricated newsreels. A shot of Zelig with a group of bathing beauties, for example, might be viewed as a little meditation on the quirks of silent-era newsreel photography: it's a still camera pose for a moving picture camera, a "durational" tableau with Zelig acting "hot" serially via an "aroused" shiver repeated several times; it is the non-actor acting "arousal" repeatedly, with the result that its cliché is exposed (it's mechanical) and transformed (Zelig's self-consciousness makes him change each repetition in a way that freshens it with spontaneity and a movie-made authenticity). The pleasant, lyrical elements of such a shot override the accompanying deconstructive tendencies, and *Zelig* seems in the process to arrive at a kind of sophisticated retreat to lost innocence which nevertheless insists on the irreversibility of the loss.

As such, *Zelig* is both nostalgic and analytical. Like *Citizen Kane* it is a kind of heroic monument to ambiguity but one which makes certain concessions to its audience. *Kane* has Rosebud and images of smoke at the end to provide a kind of climax within the codes of Hollywood melodrama. *Zelig*'s love story performs a similar function, but its final images (an "amateur" shot of the two lovers strolling in the afternoon sunshine) is in part a commentary on the film's romantic nostalgia: the lovers are seen from a distance and eventually they move beyond the camera's range. They and what they represent recede in the distance and disappear from view, making them at once figures of archival footage and images of living beings whose lives move beyond the camera's ability to follow and visualize. *Zelig*'s "movie-made authenticity" resides in moments like these, which expose image codes while also giving new meaning to the images themselves.

Not the least of the thoughtful pleasures of *Zelig* comes from its wealth of implications at a variety of levels. It can also be taken, for example, as a tribute to Mia Farrow, who here and in Allen's subsequent *Broadway Danny Rose* reveals previously unsuspected sides of her ability as an actress. There is a fine play of forms in its crafty mélange of movie *genres:* newsreel, home movie, Hollywood pastiche, medical document, talking-head interview. And its allusiveness sets up reverberations which enrich structure and—especially via Lindbergh and Chaplin—theme.

—PETER HOGUE AND
MARION BRONSON

SWING SHIFT

Director: Jonathan Demme. Producer: Jerry Bick. Script: Rob Morton. Photography: Tak Fujimoto. Music: Patrick Williams. Warners.

There's a terrific movie in the World War II home front comedy drama *Swing Shift,* but